



WEST MARIN WILD

By Jeff Miller

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The Big Year

Inspired by Big Year competitions among birders to eyeball the most species possible in a single year, my friend Brent has cooked up an event that publicizes and protects our local endangered species within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The GGNRA Endangered Species Big Year (www.ggnrabigyear.org) is a race against time to see and protect all of the imperiled species in the GGNRA.

The Big Year is a competitive event to see the most local endangered species between January 1 and December 31, 2008. It is intended to reconnect Bay Area residents with the natural resources and values of the GGNRA and introduce them to the 33 endangered species found in the Park through individual exploration and guided expeditions. Most importantly, participants must complete specific conservation action items that help recover the species.

The GGNRA (www.nps.gov/goga/) legislative boundary includes federal, state and locally managed park and watershed lands in coastal Marin, San Francisco and San Mateo counties. This area contains more endangered species than Yellowstone, Yosemite, Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks combined. This array of imperiled biodiversity in the midst of the Bay Area is a source of wonder and celebration, but also cause for concern. The dire status of so many native species indicates we should reexamine our relationship to our local ecosystems. The Big Year will allow Bay Area residents to do just that.

The Big Year celebrates the effectiveness of the Endangered Species Act, featuring several local species on the road to recovery - such as the brown pelican and southern sea otter - and highlighting those on the brink of extinction, like the single remaining Presidio manzanita plant.

Big Year species you may be lucky enough to see in Marin County are Steller sea lion, humpback whale, California red-legged frog, western snowy plover, northern spotted owl, marbled murrelet, brown pelican, California clapper rail, salt marsh harvest mouse, tidewater goby, coho salmon, steelhead trout, chinook salmon, mission blue butterfly, California freshwater shrimp, Tiburon paintbrush and Marin dwarf-flax. Marin lands within the GGNRA legislative boundary include the Marin Headlands, Muir Beach, Muir Woods, Sinton Beach, MMWD watershed lands, and eastern portions of Point Reyes National Park.

Participants can join scheduled trips to observe endangered species or explore on their own. To check a species off the list, you must observe it alive within the GGNRA legislative boundary, complete a conservation action item for that species, and comply with the Big Year's ethical wildlife viewing principles to protect critters and their habitats.

The Big Year web site details natural history, threats, likely observation locations, and an action item for each of the 33 plants and animals; information about the GGNRA and the Endangered Species Act; a calendar of scheduled events, trips and habitat restoration projects; and a comprehensive checklist. You can post your sightings, compare totals with others, and sign-up for e-mail alerts to find out when and where species are spotted.

The Big Year will kick-off with a celebration at the San Francisco Zoo at 1 pm on January 6, followed by a trip to see snowy plovers at Ocean Beach. Special guests at the event include a bald eagle, a peregrine falcon, and a San Francisco garter snake. Surely someone from a socially acknowledged nature loving town will win the competition.

West Marin Wild is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at P.O. Box 111, Bolinas.